

## CHAPTER TWO

### LETTING GO

To “let go”, is an expression often used in contemporary language, yet little is known about the experience and its true meaning. According to Ainsworth - Smith and Speck (1982): “ Letting go can imply being gently drawn into a new sort of existence; or being released or dragged into a void where nothing is safe or nothing consistent” (p.35).

Defined by *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, letting go is to “release, set at liberty, lose hold of, relinquish hold of, dismiss from thought, or cease to restrain”. The term presents itself as a paradoxical and dialectical concept, where both a sense of liberation and a sense of loss are defined. The term implies change, through mobility, from one position to another.

To let go (αφήμι-aphimi) is multifaceted in its meaning of to send away, set free, dissolve, put away, give up, neglect, leave alone, cancel, allow, tolerate, forsake, dismiss and forgive (Lindell & Scott, 1968; Newman, 1971). Upon pursuit of the epistemological foundations of the term, we return to the early Greeks and find the derivative roots (χώρι-chori) of separate and apart, holding diverse meanings related to (i) empty space, place, land, country (χώρος-choros); (ii) to give place, hold, contain (χωρείν-chorin) and (iii) to separate (χωρίζειν-chorisin) (Klein, 1971). The term is paradoxically linked with concepts of separation, holding, containment and space.

A review of psychological literature reveals no significant theory regarding the concept of letting go, and a gap appears. The term is often used in self-help books. Various books have been published with the term in the title and deal with diverse themes that include amongst others, emotions and attitude change (Jampolsky, 1970); parenting (Bassoff, 1988; Krystal, 1993); loss and bereavement (Ainsworth-Smith & Speck, 1982); management (Payne & Payne, 1994); creativity (Mc Niff, 1998) and terminal illness (Urofsky, 1993; Schwartz, 1998). Nevertheless, the psychological meaning of the phenomenon remains unexplored. In pursuit of psychological literature regarding letting go, I was able to find twenty-five articles, published over the last twenty-three years, with ‘letting go’ in the title. The term makes its appearance in diverse fields of psychology

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and includes: disability (Grant, 1989); terminal illness (Cramond, Faenkel & Barratt, 1990); learning (Greenhalgh, 1987); transpersonal (O'Connell, 1984); psychotherapy (Lanyado, 1999; Orgel, 2000; Philip, 1994); forgiveness (Baures 1996); loss and bereavement (Walter, 1997); social theology (Neal, 1984); parenting (Lubbe, 1996; Perigo 1985; Rimmerman & Keren 1995) aging (Chevan, 1995) and relationships (Gwyther, 1990). The majority of the published articles deal with termination in psychotherapy. Use of the term appears to be on the increase, and yet, the psychological significance of the phenomenon remains unattended to. In an attempt to reveal the essence, structure and meaning of this phenomenon as it appears in the life-world of individuals, the present study will employ a phenomenological-psychological perspective.

In pursuit of psychological literature regarding the phenomenon of letting go, a plethora of studies, books and articles on separation became available. The term separation is often used synonymously with the term to let go, but what is letting go? What is the lived experience of this phenomenon? Is it synonymous with separation and what is its meaning?

In psychology, the concept of separation remains dominant in the field of development where, over the last twenty-eight years, Margaret Mahler's separation-individuation has become the prevailing paradigm. Psychoanalytic developmental psychology views human development as the mobility from a state of dependence to a position of autonomy, from a state of merger to differentiated selfhood. Development is essentially viewed as a process of separation. To separate is to grow and to grow is to separate. From being held, we become attached and then let go, only to find another attachment. In the psychological literature, separation is the focal point, particularly as it pertains to individuation. Whether it is in leaving home or a change in attitude, the essential developmental issue of closure and beginning is implied as a sense of separateness is defined. Psychoanalytic developmental history is a movement from oneness to separateness, from one developmental level to another (Josselson, 1988; Nemiroff & Colarusso, 1990).

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Margaret Mahler (1975; 1963) and her colleagues have made a major contribution to developmental psychology regarding separation and the concept of separation-individuation in particular. Mahler explicates separation as a lifelong process, where aspects of the initial symbiotic tie continue in adulthood. The implication is that letting go is an ontological and pivotal mode in our human development and existence. In our relationship with others, we connect and disconnect. At first, we are held, we attach, and we let go. We move from being one to being separate. As we move from one position to another, we let go, a mobility that implies development. Development is a term used by psychologists “to refer to a pattern of movement or change that begins at conception and continues through the entire life-span” (Santrock, 1986, p.14). We move on from one developmental level to another, continuously in a process of mobility. In the words of T.S. Eliot (1979):

What we call the beginning is often the end  
And to make an end is to make a beginning.  
The end is where we start from.

Beginnings and endings belong together, and it is this paradoxical abyss that I wish to look in to – the paradox of “man’s eternal struggle against fusion and isolation” (Mahler et al., 1975, p.130). The implication is that letting go is the story of human relatedness and human development. Letting go implies a human developmental context and will be approached from this perspective.

In order to establish a context for the theme of the lived experience of letting go, I will first discuss development from the perspective of theorists that view human development within a framework of mobility from one level to another. The developmental theory of Erik Erikson will be dealt with, as his recognition of mobility within and between the phases is relevant to the mobility implied in letting go. Erikson’s acknowledgement, too, of selfhood in the process of development is also significant to letting go. The seminal work of Margaret Mahler and her colleagues regarding separation in the context of individuation has to be recognised. The concept of self and mobility are acknowledged as integral to the process of growth and development. Both theories are founded on the contextuality of our existence and together provide a significant framework for approaching the phenomenon of letting go. From attending to these and other relevant

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theories, an explication of the specific aspects regarding letting go, as identified in the defining terms and as expounded by the relevant theories, will follow. That is, after providing a contextual foundation of human development, the significant concepts of holding, attachment, transitional space and autonomy as identified in the process will be reviewed.